

VZCZCXYZ0011
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSK #0106/01 0340706
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 030706Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3702
INFO RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KIEV PRIORITY 3103
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 3295
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA PRIORITY 1534
RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS PRIORITY 3517
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW PRIORITY 3176
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0841
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000106

SIPDIS

G/IWI FOR C. PONTICELLI AND G. CAVIN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [SCUL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: WOMEN,S POLITICAL WILL IS STRONG BUT UNDERUTILIZED

REF: 05 MINSK 1547

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 17, DCM met with Belarusian Organization of Working Women (BOWW) representative to discuss the political mood of women on the eve of the presidential elections, BOWW's strategy to support the opposition candidates and the organization's future projects for the post-election period. The BOWW representative complained that the political opposition has rebuffed her organization's offer to support the political campaign with its impressive network throughout the country. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 17, DCM and Poloff met with Belarusian Organization of Working Women (BOWW) representative Irina Zhikhar at the BOWW headquarters in Minsk. Zhikhar informed DCM that she was not sure how much longer BOWW's offices could remain in its current premises belonging to the Presidential Administration since the GOB has repeatedly threatened to evict BOWW because of the organization's "subversive activities."

Political Mood of Women

¶3. (C) Zhikhar described the political mood of women on the eve of the presidential elections as sympathetic but cautious; women understand the need to support the democratic process and therefore want to sign or vote for Milinkevich, but they also recognize that they have to be able to live in Belarus after the elections. Zhikhar offered that there seemed to have been more hope for change among the population before the 2001 presidential elections. Zhikhar, however, did highlight that among the people BOWW has surveyed, there appears to be a greater acceptance of women playing a more active role in politics. Zhikhar stated that if women do not actively involve themselves in politics, then nothing will change.

The Election Is Coming: Here's How We Can Help

¶4. (C) Zhikhar expressed BOWW's willingness to actively support opposition candidates, and in particular 10 Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, in the upcoming presidential elections. She said BOWW's members have offered to work "like soldiers" for Milinkevich so long as he presented them with a clear strategy. Zhikhar said that the women trust Milinkevich and are ready to risk a lot for his campaign, but that they are wary of the rest of his campaign team.

15. (C) Zhikhar mentioned that thus far the opposition campaign has not welcomed the group's help. (Note: This is not the first time post has heard an example of the 10 Coalition not fully utilizing offers of support. On January 9, youth group Malady Front (MF) representative Sergei Lisichonak told poloff although MF is supposedly part of the official campaign team and has offered to run various components of the campaign, the Milinkevich's team has continually assigned MF minor tasks and has not used MF to its full potential.) Despite the lack of response from Milinkevich's team, BOWW has taken the initiative to develop five-pronged strategy for the group to participate in the electoral process.

16. (C) BOWW is currently ghost writing a set of recommendations to present to Milinkevich on February 15 for inclusion in his official campaign platform. Zhikhar stated that BOWW has met with experts and women from the regions. She said that the responses from eight focus groups that BOWW interviewed as part of an NDI-funded project gave BOWW a keen insight of what issues the campaign should highlight. Zhikhar claims, however that Milinkevich's team does not seem to be in touch with Belarusians and described an incident involving holiday cards Milinkevich sent out that enraged the protestant community and caused him to lose their support. Zhikhar said that if Milinkevich had asked her advice about the cards, she would never have allowed him to send them.

17. (C) Zhikhar informed DCM that BOWW members are collecting nomination signatures for opposition candidates. She stressed that each member of BOWW decided for herself if she wanted to collect signatures and approached her selected candidate on her own accord. (Note: Zhikhar said that approximately 20 BOWW members chose to collect signatures for Kozulin and the rest decided to work for Milinkevich.)

18. (C) BOWW plans to get as many of its members as possible onto the precinct electoral commissions during the elections. Zhikhar feared that Lukashenko's team will receive the majority of the positions on the commissions, but BOWW is still committed to trying to obtain as many seats as possible. In addition, Zhikhar stated BOWW could recruit and attract supporters for the opposition through its social work. Finally, Zhikhar told DCM BOWW is ready to compensate its director, Maria Leva, for the next six months if she postpones her retirement and offers her services as an advisor at 10 Coalition campaign headquarters.

Life After the Elections

19. (C) Zhikhar outlined a number of projects that BOWW plans to execute after the elections. Zhikhar stated that BOWW is going to work with Voluntas head Galina Schwartz on several cooperative efforts to help children with mental deficiencies. (Note: Zhikhar said that the idea for these projects was born when she met Schwartz at the Minsk Women's Issues Working Group reception that DCM hosted to provide active women from all regions in Belarus with an opportunity to network and share ideas (reftel).) Zhikhar stated that after the elections, BOWW will focus on reorienting itself as a medium for people to realize their potential; that is, instead of providing people with help or answers to their questions, BOWW will teach women how to solve their own problems and in turn to help others. Zhikhar informed DCM of BOWW's plans to continue publishing its bulletin highlighting accomplishments of working women, information about the organization itself, and issues of concern to women. Zhikhar promised that BOWW will carry on its efforts to fight for fair employment contracts and will outline this struggle on its website www.kontraktunet.info. Zhikhar stated that BOWW plans to launch a program to help women GOB employees transition into the private sector. Other projects Zhikhar stated that BOWW will focus on include combating domestic violence, creating an internship program with a successful businesswoman for young girls, and bolstering quality of life and communal

housing services.

Comment

¶10. (C) BOWW is the largest and most organized women's group in Belarus, has made significant contributions in social work for women, and is seemingly in tune with the political mood of Belarusian women. As writing its own platform and attempting to obtain seats on the electoral commissions suggest, BOWW is determined to be a part of the democratic electoral process with or without support from Milinkevich's campaign team. The 10 Coalition's lack of cooperation with BOWW demonstrates the need for Belarus' democratic forces and parties to get over their Soviet era chauvinism and recognize and cooperate with women's organizations who can help them reach a wider spectrum of supporters during the election campaign.

Krol